

TEMPO

Volume 13 *TEMPO* 2014-2015

Article 17

2015

An Interview with Dr. Don Gibson

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Recommended Citation

(2015). An Interview with Dr. Don Gibson. *TEMPO*, 13 (1). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/tempo/vol13/iss1/17>

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Alumni Leadership Profiles

Since its founding in 1924, many graduates of the Mary Pappert School of Music have achieved noteworthy success in leadership roles in the arts. The School of Music provides musical education that connects the broad spectrum of historical and current practices; and in promoting the relationship between theory and practice, prepares professionals who will be the leaders in the musical culture of the 21st century. Duquesne music alumnus, Dr. Don Gibson, has enjoyed an exceptional career as an internationally respected leader of musical culture and, in this article, we ask him to share some of his experiences with our readers.

Currently serving as Professor of Music Theory and Dean Emeritus at Florida State University (FSU), Gibson received his B.M. and M.M. from Duquesne University and his Ph.D. from FSU. Prior to his current appointment, Gibson served as Dean of the FSU College of Music. From 1992-2005, he served on the faculty of The Ohio State University, completing 11 years as Director of the School of Music. He received the School of Music Distinguished Teaching Award from Ohio State in 2005. He has also served as Director of the School of Music at Western Michigan University, Associate Dean of the School of Music at Baylor University, Chair of the Department of Fine Arts at Elon College (University), and Chair of the Division of Instrumental Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He served as principal flute for the Greensboro Symphony and the Winston-Salem Symphony as well as principal flute and featured soloist with the United States Navy Band. In addition, Gibson has performed throughout

Japan and South Korea with recorded appearances on national radio (Japan) and national television (South Korea). A respected music theorist, his research utilized computers to examine the correlation between theoretical relatedness and the aural perception of contemporary pitch structures. The results of his investigations have been reported in the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, *Psychomusicology*, and *Music Theory: Explorations and Applications*. Gibson has served as Executive Director and National President of Pi Kappa Lambda, the national collegiate honor society for music and as Chair of the Commission on Accreditation for the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM). He was elected an Honorary Member of NASM in 2004 and recently completed a term as national president of the organization. He is also serving as a member of the Presser Foundation Scholarship Committee and continues his service to Pi Kappa Lambda as a member of the Board of Regents.

An Interview with Dr. Don Gibson



TEMPO: *Don, your impressive resume shows that you have risen to many leadership challenges in your career. At Duquesne, we are grateful for your advice to our students regarding ways that they could approach their future music careers. One interesting feature of your background is your expertise in performance, music theory, and administration. How have you organized your time to achieve excellence in these areas?*

Gibson: My efforts and accomplishments in these 3 areas unfolded sequentially rather than simultaneously. While I have known music administrators with the capacity to maintain productivity in their music specializations while serving as full-time deans or directors, I do not count myself among them. I came to Duquesne as a 21-year-old freshman, having served the prior 3 ½ years in the Navy Band. While I accumulated a great deal of performance experience in the service, I did little else to advance my skills and knowledge in music. I began my studies at Duquesne as a flute performance major and completed 2 degrees in that discipline under the guidance of Bernard Goldberg. Beyond the flute studio, though, I found many challenges and rewards in my music theory studies. For my initial interest in that area, I owe a great deal to Robert Shankovich. Professor Shankovich was a first-rate teacher who provided me with hours of additional private instruction in counterpoint. My life-long interest in music theory was sealed through those counterpoint lessons. As I entered my year of graduate studies, I had the great fortune of working privately with Professor James Hunter. We explored many musical masterworks as well as theoretical treatises representing the various aspects of the discipline. While I entered Duquesne as a performer, I left as a performer with supporting interest and capabilities as a theorist. Upon the completion of my master's degree, I entered the profession with a full-time position blending studio flute and music theory responsibilities. With the completion of my Ph.D. degree in Music Theory from Florida State University, I found myself at the front end of my career in administration. My scholarly work in music theory was completed during my early years in administration, prior to my work at Ohio State and Florida State. As I look back on

things, I believe the singular nature of my focus, first on performance, then on scholarly work, and finally on administration, enabled me to achieve my fullest potential in each area.

TEMPO: *Currently, you are teaching at one of the nation's largest and most prestigious music schools. Over the course of your teaching career you have served a number of fine institutions. What gave you the motivation to continuously seek new challenges, and how did you know when it was time to seek a new opportunity?*

Gibson: While I have worked at a number of institutions in varying roles, my career objective was always rather simple – to do the very best work I could with the job at hand. As suggested to me by my mentor in music administration, President Emeritus Robert Glidden (Ohio University), opportunities come from demonstrated success. In my case, each new opportunity came as a result of the work I had accomplished to date. While I very much believe that I have led a charmed life in the academy, I also believe that focusing on current challenges, rather than constantly looking for the next opportunity, played an important part in the progress of my career.

TEMPO: *Your decades of leadership experience give you a unique long-term perspective on the growth and development of career possibilities in the field of music. From your perspective, what are the significant challenges that the music students of today face as their careers unfold?*

Gibson: Projecting the future is risky business. Back in 2008, who would have guessed the stock market would rise above 17,000 in a few short years? Nevertheless, as we have discussed at the national level for the past few years, it is important for all of us in higher education to work toward curricular models designed to prepare students for 40-year careers in music. This is particularly challenging in our business. Music is both a creative and a re-creative art. We spend much of our time in the performance of historical

masterworks – it can be said that we struggle against the challenge of being totally bound by our rich traditions. I believe the development of entrepreneurial skills needs to be high among the priorities of all 21st century music majors. It is noteworthy that the School of Music at Duquesne was among the early institutions to focus on this emerging area. While it is difficult to imagine exactly what the life of a professional musician/teacher will be like in 40 years, it is equally difficult to imagine that it won't be significantly different than it is today, given the evolution of technology and the changing fiscal landscape.

TEMPO: *Speaking of mentoring, our new Dean, Dr. Seth Beckman, served as an Associate Dean during your tenure as Dean at Florida State. Yes, a remarkable unfolding of events.*

Gibson: When I accepted the position of Dean of the FSU College of Music in 2005, it marked the highpoint of my career. It was quite an honor for me to return to my doctoral institution in that role. I had a very similar response when Dr. Seth Beckman was appointed to the position of Dean of the School of Music at Duquesne. Dr. Beckman served as my Senior Associate Dean throughout my 8 years as Dean. During his tenure at FSU, he was widely admired for his wisdom, strength of character, administrative skill, and dedication to the institution, its students, and traditions. While I kept him more than busy managing the academic programs in the college, he was constantly called upon to serve in important capacities across the campus. Beyond all of that, Seth was a good friend and constant supporter. I am delighted that my former associate and my alma mater have found each other in what I know will be a mutually beneficial association.

TEMPO: *Our last, and possibly our most difficult question, asks you to consider what you might have done differently. Leadership theory reminds that if we are not making any mistakes, then most likely we are not learning and growing. Along the way, did you learn from any mistakes that our students could learn from and possibly avoid themselves?*

Gibson: With over 25 years in administration, I have made my share of mistakes. Some were silly, some were quite challenging, and many seemed impossible to avoid. Rather than focusing on any one blunder, let me suggest one area of administrative behavior that can calm the waters during difficult times and perhaps, help avoid missteps. I am speaking about the importance of open communication. While institutions vary in their approach to *openness vs. confidentiality*, I have found that it always seems best to be as open and complete with the facts as the institution and situation will bear. Academics are thinkers – if administrators don't fill in the blanks, one of them will (occasionally with the wrong "facts"). Relationships built on trust can withstand many stresses, and trust is best sustained through honest, open communication. With each decision made, many will object. It is always best for objections to be based on facts, or as I have jokingly stated many times in my career, I only want to be hated for only the right reasons!

TEMPO: *Dean Emeritus Gibson, thank you for offering your thoughts and wisdom to your alma mater. At Duquesne, we are proud to count you among our exemplary graduates, and we extend our warmest wishes toward your continued positive influence as a cultural leader of the 21st century.*



The Rorer Piano Masterclass Series

Frances Lehner (B.S. Music Education, 2001; M.M. Performance, 2003), alumna of the Mary Pappert School of Music, always exhibited intellectual curiosity, youthful vigor, and dedication to learning. It was her love of learning that fostered her love for teaching. Early in her undergraduate work at Duquesne, Lehner knew she had the heart of a teacher and a desire to mentor the next generation of pianists. She studied how students learn and moved from a dependent to an independent learner, from pedagogy to andragogy by her junior year, always taking pride in all of her work.

After graduating from Duquesne, she married Jonathon Rorer and moved to the Philadelphia area. Together, they established the Rorer Foundation and have made generous donations each year to the Duquesne University Piano Department. Using funds from these donations, former School of Music Dean Dr. Edward Kocher, along with Piano Department Chair Kenneth Burky, decided to establish the "Rorer Piano Masterclass Series." The series enables outstanding teachers to come to Duquesne to give monthly master classes to the piano majors. There are 7 classes during the academic year, each class lasting around 2 hours.

Due to the Rorer's generosity, this series has become a valuable part of each piano student's education. For this, the piano department is most grateful.